

## **The Utopian Quest in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru***

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### **Abstract**

*Prior to Nelson Mandela's ascension to power in South Africa, literature of the country had been essentially a protest against the dehumanizing treatment that was meted on the Blacks by the minority Whites who were at the helm of power through the policy of apartheid. This somehow created socio-political upheavals and a pervasive atmosphere. Consequently, some writers while unfolding this social enigma, did so with a vision of proposing an ideal society for humanity. One of them is Bessie Head. This paper seeks to examine Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru* in a bid to demonstrate that her quest for a perfect society has been provoked by her experiences in life and the dystopian South African. Informed by new historicism, it is argued that an ideal or a perfect society is a figment of the imagination.*

### **Introduction**

The focus of this paper is to examine the idea of Utopia in two of Bessie Head's Novels. This necessitates a brief presentation of the dystopian<sup>1</sup> South African society during the days of apartheid for a better comprehension. The South African society during Head's days was largely undemocratic because the

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non-Whites who made up more than half of the population were dominated, oppressed and treated like second-class citizens. This set up was not comfortable for human survival. It is out of this dystopian background that Head attempts to fashion a perfect society in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) and *Maru* (1971). New historicism underscores that any meaningful literature needs to be done with an eye on history. Ross Murfin notes that “New historicists, like formalists and their critics, acknowledge the importance of the literary text, but they also analyse the text with an eye to history” (239).

The apartheid system in South Africa came into existence in 1912 but was officially pronounced and adopted as a government policy in 1948. Jack Watson explains that Dr Malan used apartheid as his campaign slogan to canvas for votes in the 1948 elections which he won. Apartheid became real with the passing of many acts/laws which stipulated segregations in various domains. This was done with the objective of thwarting the growth of the black majority. Due to the socio-economic and political inadequacies of this policy on the blacks, they started revolting against the policy. Most writers simply left the country either on voluntary or imposed exile given that most of their works were under strict censorship.

In his article “Interrogating silence: New possibilities faced by South African literature...” Andre Brink points out that:

The experience of apartheid has demonstrated that different kinds on levels of silence exist... Behind these loomed larger, greyer areas, whole territories of historical consciousness silenced by the power establishment and invalidated by the dominant discourse in order to make them inaccessible to other voices. This included the distortions of the right to the land, abuses in the name of Christianity, the extent of miscegenation between staunch Afrikaners and their slaves or servants, then enslavement of indigenous peoples in the interior strategies to ensure and perpetuate the marginalization of women in both black and white societies. (15)

Under this stressful and difficult situation, it became almost impossible for writers to write. Those who had the courage to write were only out to promote internal resistance<sup>2</sup>. Most of the texts that were written however were generally meant to criticise the apartheid regime. This explains why most of the authors were being chased. Derek Attridge and Rose Mary in their *Introduction to writing South Africa*, wrote:

South Africa has passed through a period that has for obvious reasons produced a large body of what one might call judgemental texts, both critical and creative texts that assume an ethical sufficiency to exist in the condemnation of apartheid and its agents. For this reason the current South African situation forms a productive arena for the exploration of the uses and limitations of: as well as alternatives to judgemental writing. (7)

With this very sordid background, most of the South African writers decided to go on exile and others committed suicide in desperation.

Dorothy Driver notes that writers in exile were separated from writers at home, and none of them could readily claim a literary heritage. One observes there that South Africa was not certainly conducive to the flowering of creative literature and we understand that great literature generally operate through the vision of a traditional outlook.

Unlike most South African writers who went on voluntary or involuntary exile, Head's situation was even more deplorable because she knew neither her mother nor her father. She has made this very clear in an interview with Lee Nichols:

I was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, on the Sixth of July, nineteen thirty-seven? I did not have any parents. In fact, here is a sort of tragedy attached to my birth. My mother was a white woman of a very upper class family. Her family was very wealthy and she acquired me out of wedlock from a Blackman. This succeeded in getting my mother classified insane and by

the time I was born, she had been admitted to the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital where I was born. (49)

Head was then brought up by foster parents. She was considered a curse because of her strange birth and origin. This carried with it a question mark. Her mother was therefore considered mentally sick after her birth and thus was taken to the psychiatric hospital where she died shortly. This is confirmed by the words of a white missionary in *A Woman Alone*: "Your mother was insane. If you are not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by a stable boy who was a native". (4)

Consequently, Head was rejected by her maternal relative. She was rather preferred dead than being alive. As she grew up, she felt rejected and lonely in the world. After qualifying as a teacher and teaching for a few years at a Primary School for Coloured Children in Clair wood –Durban, she resigned from her job in 1958. She left to work as a journalist for 'Gold City Post; a Drum Publication. This was a weekly newspaper catering to black leadership. During this time, she suffered untold suffering. But an unsuccessful marriage left her with a son with whom she was living in a two-roomed house without water and electricity. She expresses her plight thus: "There must be many people like in South Africa whose birth and beginning are filled with calamity and disaster, the sort of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret person swept under carpet".(3)

Life for her was very infilling. With the treason trial of 1961, Head lost many of her dear friends, consequently, the sense of loneliness, violation, sadness and horror compelled her to exile. Her involvement in the trial of a friend and in the activities of a banned political party (PAC) generated in her the idea to leave South Africa for good.

Although, she was denied citizenship by Botswana in 1977, she read an advertisement on magazine for teachers in Botswana, she applied and as luck would have it, she gained a teaching post in Serowe in Bechuana land protectorate (1999:14). So covered by an exit permit, she took permanent exile in

Botswana. In any case, she lost her job because of her sexual harassment by the Principal of her school. As a result, the school committee considered her mentally sick and requested that she should undergo a mental check up. She however, remained in Botswana under the status of a refugee. So neither South Africa nor Botswana provided a sense of accommodation for Head. After losing her job, she resorted to writing while hoping to leave Botswana. However, it should be noted that her writing experience actually began in Botswana.

### **THE MOVE TOWARDS AN IDEAL WORLD**

This part of my paper examines various attempts by Head to put in place a perfect society through wish fulfilment. She does this at the socio-cultural, economic and political levels. This falls under what is generally referred to as Utopian literature. "Utopia" here can be defined as an ideal or perfect place or state, or any visionary system of political or social perfection. In literature, it refers to a detailed description of a nation or commonwealth ordered according to a system which the author proposes as a better way of life than any known to exist, a system that could be instituted if the present one could be cancelled and people could start over. The word itself was coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 book of the same name. The roots of the word are from the Greek *ou* (not) and *topos* (place), thus meaning "no place" or "nowhere" ([www.utopizswire.com](http://www.utopizswire.com)). This is the type of society that Head tries to build through fiction. She attempts to fashion a society in which everyone has a place. Every one is accepted, happy, feels free as Edward Ako (1999) puts it: "Bessie Head depicts or imagines an ideal society, a kind of utopia, a land in which there is magic and wonder, a land of innocence, respect and trust, in short, a gathering of rain clouds." (148)

We observe that Head is out to present to the world a society in which there is good human relationship, a kind of world in which people feel for each other, work with each other, a society in which sex, race and skin colour are not used as the standard for human competence or judgement, but a society in which prejudice is absent and everyone has respect for social norms and values. Above

all, a society in which everyone feels at home and for the human race .Edward Ako (1999) confirms thus:

When people break away from their constrictions, when they forgo their prejudice and are prepared to try something new, when what matters is the depth of one's soul and not the colour of the skin or sex when together, the people unite... their losses become their gains. (151)

Golema Mmidi, as depicted in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a kind of utopian society purged of prejudice and free of tragedies. Social norms and values are well respected and so people flee from other inhospitable set-ups to seek solace and a place in Golema Mmidi. We read, "Golema Mmidi consisted of people, individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life". (22) This is a society in which brotherliness, peace and love have a place.

This view falls in line with Obiajulu Ogwude's in her article, "Protest and Commitment in Bessie Head's Utopia": "Utopia is a good and idealized place, endowed with providing the greatest amount of freedom and happiness in parts of Botswana, Southern Africa and then as an ideal place that is nowhere" (71). Although Makhaya is not physically behind bars or under house arrest, he finds South Africa constricting and strongly believes that he can evolve only in a free society: "If you can find society that leaves the individual to develop freely you ought to choose that society as your home". (80)

From the afore-going statement, we can interpret that Golema Mmidi is a society which is not inhibiting. Human beings are free to aspire to whatever level possible and to act freely and go about life with every sense of belonging.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, human relationships and interactions are geared towards a utopian set-up. Characters are in search of happiness and the right place. Makhaya has no place in the biased and racist South African society. He decides to move to Golema Mmidi where he hopes to find physical and psychological freedom and to live a better and fulfilling life. Makhaya's revelation to old Dinorego is a testimony to this view: "I just wanted to step on free ground. I don't care about anything not even the white man. I want to feel what is like to

live in a free country and then may be some of the evils in my life will correct themselves".<sup>10</sup>

Makhaya's vision of Golema Mmùidi is that of a demi-paradise which parallels and sharply contrasts with his home country South Africa, wherein, life is harsh and inhospitable to the extent that he is unable to marry and make children. Rather, he is looked upon and treated like a "kaffir" and reduced to a kind of outcast. Hence he had to leave South Africa to Golema Mmidi. In this way, there is no hope because children symbolise hope and continuity.

According to Makhaya, it is disadvantageous and imperative to move "out of a part of Africa that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false belief".<sup>16</sup> South Africa is presented as a constricting and inhibiting world in which one cannot blossom. This explains why Makhaya leaves. From his experiences, we observe that hardship rather moulds an individual to success.

Human relationship in Golema Mmidi is free from apathy. Consequently, one person's problem is everybody's concern. Dinorego is a man full of kindness. He is not only fatherly, but lovely and responsible too. Socially, he is a kind of welfare officer with the purity of the soul. That is why he treats Gilbert and Makhaya like his own "sons". This he reveals in an exchange with Makhaya "I have no word to describe Gilbert, son... just as I take you as my own son so do I take Gilbert as my own son".<sup>27</sup>

Dinorego's entire family loves Makhaya who is not their kind. They feel for him, and look at him as one of them. They show a lot of hospitality towards him. When Dinorego meets Makhaya for the first time, he immediately introduces him to his family. Food and water is also offered him.<sup>28</sup> The hospitality and brotherliness that is directed towards Makhaya the stranger reveals that Head manipulates her characters to show that people can live together without class segregation between black and white which is her objective.

In the same story, Gilbert a White loves Makhaya immensely. He expresses the willingness to invite him for supper. Gilbert Believes that humanity no matter its background and origin is one. He is determined to ameliorate the

agronomic situation of Golema Mmidi for the welfare of all. Thanks to his agronomic knowledge, he is able to impart agronomic know-how to the people of Golema Mmidi for free. Gilbert is confident that a single individual is incapable of bringing about a positive agricultural revolution. People must work cooperatively to convert the landscape. His dream is that all the cattle of Golema Mmidi should graze on cooperatively owned feeding grounds (39). To realise this dream, he implements in close collaboration with Makhaya and the women. About Gilbert we are told: "He was first and first and foremost a practical down to earth kind of man intently on being of useful service to his fellowmen" (81).

Gilbert converts Golema Mmidi into a tragic free land. He works with the women to change adversity to prosperity. Here, he has broken the patriarchal structure that women are subservient. This is Head's deliberate attempt to create an ideal world different from the norms of society. Through modern agricultural practices, the people of Golema Mmidi convert a barren landscape to an evergreen one. They are able to produce enough food to eat and sell such that, the extra and kitchen thrash are converted to cattle feed. In this way, everyone is happy and healthy. As a matter of fact, matrimonial infidelity becomes a talk of the past. Moreover, matrimonial abandonment caused by the mad search for grazing land by the men who use to abandon their families became unnecessary. About this, we are told:

Towards the end of the long dry season they too left their watering places along the river beds, and moved with their cattle into the bush where the grass grew in tangled confusion under the trees and watered their cattle in the drinking pools of the wild buck. (161)

From this excerpt, we are made to understand that the men more often abandoned their homes and went in search of grass to feed their cattle. Feeding the cattle well resulted in good sales and consequently they could buy all their needs. About this, the narrator says: "The idea was to get capital in hand which would open up the way for purchasing fertilizers, seeds and the equipment necessary to increase food production in Golema Mmidi. (99)".



Through cooperatives, Gilbert is able to end subsistent agriculture, which was of little benefit to the people. He eliminates the land tenure system that stratified the society into the rich and the poor and maintained the poor in a permanently poor position. Head's fictionalized ideal world can be seen through Gilbert's vision of society, which is that everyone and anyone should work cooperatively together and reap the benefits cooperatively as we are made to apprehend in the ensuing assertion:

He wanted Golema Mmidi to be cooperative in everything as that was the only way of defeating the land tenure system in the tribal reserves and the only way of defeating subsistent agriculture which was geared towards keeping the poor more poor until eternity. (156)

In Golema Mmidi, personal sorrow becomes communal sorrow. The death of Paulina's son, for instance, is the concern of the entire community as everyone is grieved. This is a pointer to new historicism which states that literature is a product of society since man does not live in a vacuum. In African societies, death and life are celebrated communally. On her part, Paulina is a very selfless woman. She works hard to improve the society. She is very dynamic. She imparts Gilbert's ideas to the other women. This helps to open up the way for the agricultural revolution in Golema Mmidi. She is thus indispensable to the village community. Consequently, when Chief Matenge, an impediment to progress attempts to victimise her, the whole village community converges on him and he ends his own very life. This further guarantees growth and happiness in the society.

Mma Millipede on her part, is the "people's mother". She is interested in the welfare of the entire community. Although she is aged, she is willing to work for others. She makes every move to see into it that Makhaya feels at home, and feeds well. She investigates into his health situation thus: "do you eat well... please inform me so that I can accompany you to the hospital as you are now far away from your home and relatives" (71). Thus, through her character, Head portrays ideal motherhood. This could be understood as Head's attempt at

fraternisation. A mother is a symbol of life and motherliness and should be propagated even if one is not a biological mother. She is able to organise the wedding of Maria and Makhaya as if they are her biological children. In a utopian setup, suspicion towards each other is absent. People must trust one another: thus Dinorego (Maria's father) hands over to Mma Millipede the total responsibility of his daughter's marriage.

The breaking down of gender barrier as a projection of an ideal world is also an important aspect that has been treated in this study. The traditional notion of women being relegated to the background at the socio-economic and political levels in this society has been evaded. Women are no longer looked upon as objects. To idealise her society, Head depicts in her novels female characters who represent the view of the new self-assertive women. The picture of the woman presented to us here is no longer that of one having a complex vis-à-vis men, but that of an educated woman, who, aware of the unfairness of her society, consequently longs to be fulfilled in her self as a full human being and not as anybody's appendage. Head bridges this gap by making these women to expand their limited roles of wives and mothers and become so active at the socio-economic and political levels. The hitherto deaf, dumb, quite and contemptible woman has acquired a voice and speaks out aloud. To confirm this, Lyod W. Brown (1982) has the following comment:

African women who have been hopelessly mute suddenly found their voices and began to be heard over the world. Despite their exclusion from educational, socio and political opportunities, a number of African women have overcome this obstacle. (2)

Characters like ma Millipede, Paulina Sebeso stand out glaringly. They do not want to see their femininity as subjective. They decide to put the best of their input and stride alongside with men without fear.

As a matter of fact Mma Millipede is courted by Ramogodi, the son of the reigning chief. It is said that Ramogodi is sexually attractive to women and takes this advantage to hop from woman to woman. For this reason, almost all the women of the village have been his bed mates. She counters this ancient custom

whereby a man maintained his dignity and self-control in front of women over a harem of concubines. Despite Ramogodi's high position in their society, she turns down his proposal. She does not intend to be taken as an object, to be merely used to satisfy the insatiable sexual desires of the son of a chief. Head does this to obtain an ideal set-up, wherein women and men are treated on egalitarian bases. Once Mma Millipede divorces Ramogodi, she settles in Golema Mmidi and becomes a prominent person. Her popularity in the village makes people to consult her to settle important matters. Consequently, Gilbert relies on her to find out the right person who will lead women in the construction of tobacco shed and its cultivation. This accounts for her participation in the cooperative project. To project the image of an ideal society, there is a show of peaceful-co-existence and collaboration amongst the characters.

She organises Dinorego's daughter's marriage. The reception takes place at her premises. This social and peaceful atmosphere reveals an ideal set-up. This quality of leadership and wisdom definitely conferred on Ma Millipede, a sense of dignity and honour in the society in which women are of importance.

In fact, the opening of the cooperative gives Paulina Sebesso the scope for managerial talents and brings her intimately in touch with the leading males of the village. As such, she has the advantage over other women of the village as she is the most intellectual among them and lives near the farm. Head, by bringing men and women together, is opting for a perfect world where no one should look on another as inferior.

Politically, Paulina is full of ambitions and displays qualities of leadership. These qualities are recognised by both the women who refer to her as a "big brain" and by Gilbert and Makhaya. For Makhaya, Paulina runs the whole village through sheer will power, whereas for Gilbert, Paulina is invaluable to him and without her initiative, nothing would start. This evidence of men's confidence in Paulina shows that nowadays, men recognise and appreciate talent when they see it. This shows an ideal community where in men and women work together for the common good of the society.

To launch the co-operative project, Paulina actually organises women into work groups and serves as a supervisor. The narrator substantiates this view as follows:

Paulina Sebesso was to bring the women of the village to the farm and help open the way for new agricultural development in Golema Mmidi. The women are group... They arose and walk in a brisk determined group to the farm, Paulina taking the lead as she always and automatically did. (75, 105, 136)

This statement goes to confirm that women are full of capabilities and if they are given an opportunity, they can realise wonderful dreams. Men now have to count on women in order to undertake meaningful action in social and political development.

In this novel, Gilbert cannot run the cooperative without the help of women. In this case, the mutual need of men and women underlines the need for cooperation and teamwork and not exclusion. This is the kind of ideal set up that Bessie Head opts for. In this way, instead of stagnation promoted by characters like Chief Matenge, there will be growth, peace, prosperity and progress in the society. Therefore, solidarity between men and women must be the first and foremost important factor in the development of the society. The coming together of men and women for the common good of the society is symbolised by rain clouds. In fact, the gathering of rain Clouds in the midst of draught is a sign of hope.

Economically, Head has made attempts at putting in place a vibrant, self-reliant society. She does this by engaging men and women in common tasks for economic survival. Actually, Mma Millipede purchases the skins of wild animals which Dionrego transforms into mats and blankets for her to sell. She also sets up her own poultry. This economic venture enables Mma Millipede to become socially and economically independent. At the socio-economic and political levels, Head has put in place a vibrant ideal society by striking a balance men and women within the above mentioned denominations in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

The notion of utopia can equally be situated in Head's *Maru* (1971) at the socio-cultural, economic and political levels. Socio-culturally, although the Leseding society is dominated by the Botswanas who oppress and dominate the Masarwas (bushmen), Head uses her principal character Maru to emplace an ideal set-up. Culturally, the Masarwa have always been considered by the Botswana as people from the "bush tribe" who do not know anything. About this, a pupil is incited to insult Margaret Cadmore Junior from the Marsawa tribe thus, "Since when did a bushy go to school? We take him to the bush where he eats' mealie pap, pap" (17). As such, they are subjugated and suppressed. Head strives to solve this problem through her main character.

Maru is Witty because he has to put in place a perfect human society wherein there is respect for social norms and values, by hesitating to be crowned paramount chief while working out a solution to equate the Masarwa and Botswana tribes. The implication here is that if Maru accepts to be crowned chief, he will have to see into it that the culture of the society (racial discrimination) is kept intact as we are made to understand:

If Maru takes over as paramount Chief, he would be expected as the custodian of cultural values to maintain the status quo; at least in terms of the way his people see themselves vis-à-vis the other. Maru's dilemma therefore, is how to distance himself from the sorry state of affairs, how to keep his purity in the tainted environment. (153)

In order not to continue with prejudice, Maru tactfully calls on the king makers to give him some time to reflect over it. One is embarrassed to think that Maru does not desire the chieftaincy which every other person will normally desire. About it, he defines his position in the flowing lines:

I never intended accepting the chieftaincy

I was only born in it to see its evils and its efforts on society.

Everything I had done, had been an experience, experiment I just move on to more experiments (70)

Maru is determined to bridge the gap between the tribes. He links Moleka to his sister Dikeledi and by so doing he goes closer to the Masarwa girl Margaret Cadmore. By getting married to a person of the "bush tribe" Maru connotes that, humanity is one. Head successfully bridges the gap between, the Mararwa. Thus, if a prince can get married to a girl from the "bush tribe", it means he has deviated from the norm. Maru uses the wedding of Dikeledi and Moleka to elope with Margaret Cadmore to a land of fulfilment.

Head also employs politics in Maru to put in place an ideal set-up. She equally does this through her main character Maru. Maru has foresight. He banishes Seth, Pete and Morafi from society. These are all epitomes and promoters of prejudice. They assist Moleka to make life unbearable for Margaret. Maru is aware that if these people who are symbols of evil are purged from society, things will go well. He therefore banishes them. In this way, he purges society of racial segregation and puts in place human equality as Craig Mackenzie (1999) asserts about Maru: "He envisions a world apart from petty human hatred and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendour and glory (46)".

Maru's relationship with Margaret Cadmore Junior is a revolutionary move. When the Masarwa people in Leseding understand that Maru, a royal figure is married to one of theirs, they conclude that their marginalisation and inferiority is ended and thus hope for better days ahead. About this, Head in an interview with Lee Nichols (1981) underscores:

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. (53)

These Masarwas are thus determined to challenge full force and to eliminate whoever will attempt to look on or marginalized them. A new society is therefore in the making as the chief-Maru is married to a Masarwa. It could be said that Bessie Head uses her imaginative creation to resolve problems that were

encountered in her society. This is confirmed as Dorothy Driver (1993) underlines:

Using writing as some kind of shrine to go to some means of spiritual survival, Head made a home for a self out of what she saw as Botswana's potential to be a "cohesive whole". Her ideal community where the past is recalled in the present with the sense of a continuing and secure future, ... and not identified and thus separated in terms of class and race. (166)

We infer that Head's fiction is a kind of redemption. Her society is devoid of any human conflict. Even if there is any, she eliminates the individual who wants to obstruct human progress. Thus she is in absolute quest of a utopian society.

In this paper, we have seen that Head's work represents a society that is in absolute quest for peace and harmony. She has done this by mustering people from diverse cultural backgrounds and making them work together, by eliminating from society those who promote prejudice and to compel her characters to turn down power if they have to acquire it by stepping on others. It is imperative to emphasize that even though Head has projected a society in which human relationship is good and people feel for each other, work with each other in a society in which sex, race and skin colour are not used as the standard for human competence or judgement, all these remain a figment of the imagination. No such society can exist. It remains a utopian quest. And so we want to think that art remains a medium of education for people to learn. We should however note that dystopias inevitably conclude by depicting unpleasant, disastrous, or otherwise terrifying consequences for humanity. We can only continue to dream but they can be no perfect society. However, people can best exploit their environment and better overcome their problems; meet their needs if they work in collaboration with each other. Instead of giving up in life, one should endeavour to exploit his environment for his welfare. Hard work and human collaboration as realised are a remedy to human problems and a springboard for development.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the Greek word for "Bad place" the opposite of Utopia. A dystopia is usually set at some point in the author's future and describes a society in which we would not want to live. Writers generally want to alert readers to the Pitfalls and dangers of society's present course or of a course society might conceivably take one day.

<sup>2</sup> Internal resistance. This means that most of the literature that was written by home based writers during the period of apartheid was not only meant to protest but to conscientize the oppressed blacks so that they could rise up against the minority white who were at the helm of power.

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